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ABSTRACT

This lesson offers students experience in making historical meaning from eyewitness accounts that present a range of different perspectives. Students begin with a case study in working with alternative reports of a single event: the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. First, they compare two newspaper reports on the fire, then two memoirs of the fire written many decades later. After noting how these accounts complement and compete with each another, students produce a research report explaining how they would use these primary source materials to write three kinds of history: a factual account of the fire, a description of the historical experience, and an interpretation of the fire's historical significance. Turning from this well-documented event, students next consider a unique eyewitness account--the diary kept by a Confederate girl when her Tennessee town was occupied by Union troops during the Civil War. The lesson asks students to evaluate the reliability of this primary source and to draw up a list of questions they would want to ask and issues they would want to explore before making this eyewitness report part of the historical record. To conclude the lesson, students apply their research skills to present-day eyewitness accounts, gathering published examples or conducting interviews, and produce a report on their value and use as historical evidence. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (6-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

This lesson offers students experience in making historical meaning from eyewitness accounts that present a range of different perspectives. Students begin with a case study in working with alternative reports of a single event: the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. First, they compare two newspaper reports on the fire, then two memoirs of the fire written many decades later. After noting how these accounts complement and compete with one another, students produce a research report explaining how they would use these primary source materials to write three kinds of history: a factual account of the fire, a description of the historical experience, and an interpretation of the fire's historical significance. Turning from this well-documented event, students next consider a unique eyewitness account, the diary kept by a Confederate girl when her Tennessee town was occupied by Union troops during the Civil War. The lesson asks students to evaluate the reliability of this primary source and to draw up a list of questions they would want to ask and issues they would want to explore before making this eyewitness report part of the historical record. To conclude the lesson, students apply their research skills to present-day eyewitness accounts, gathering published examples or conducting interviews, and produce a report on their value and use as historical evidence.

Literature: Biography

Literature: Essay

History: U.S.: Civil War and Reconstruction

6-12

Two to three class periods

information gathering and research skills

primary document analysis

critical thinking

historical analysis

Internet skills

Learning Objectives

(1) To gain experience in working with eyewitness accounts of historical events; (2) To explore issues related to the evaluation of historical evidence; (3) To consider the uses of historical evidence within different kinds of history; (4) To recognize that historical evidence may raise questions rather than provide answers about a past event.

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling

Lesson Plan

1 Begin by providing each student with a copy of the "Written Document Analysis Worksheet" available through EDSITEment at the **Digital Classroom** website of the National Archives and Records Administration. At the website's homepage, click "Document Analysis Worksheets" in the blue sidebar and click Written Document. Discuss with students how they can use the worksheet to discover various kinds of information in an historical document, including facts about the document itself (date, author, audience, etc.) and facts about the past. Explain that in this lesson students will use the worksheet to examine a variety of historical eyewitness reports, first comparing several reports of a single dramatic event, then evaluating a unique account of a different,

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more complex historical situation.

2 Have students first read two newspaper accounts of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, available through EDSITEment at **The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory** website. For the first account, a front page report from the *Chicago Tribune* published two days after the fire, on October 11, 1871, click "The Great Chicago Fire" on the website's homepage, then select "Library" under the heading "The Great Conflagration" and click The Tribune Reports to Chicago on Its Own Destruction. For the second account, published by the *Chicago Evening Post* on October 17, 1871, click "The Web of Memory" on the website's homepage, then select "Library" under the heading "Media Event" and click ...the adamantine bulwarks of hell...

- Have students work individually or in groups to analyze these two newspaper reports using the Written Document Analysis Worksheet. Compare their responses to selected sections of the worksheet in a class discussion. For example, what questions did they pose that the authors of these reports left unanswered?
- Help students compare the two newspaper reports, using the chalkboard to create a chart of similarities and differences. Do the reporters agree in their description of where the fire began and how it spread? Do they mention the same landmarks of destruction and havens of safety? Do they disagree on any questions of fact?
- Compare the reporters' selection of episodes: do they highlight similar incidents? focus on similar scenes of human interest? share a vocabulary for evoking these dramatic moments? Ask students to offer possible reasons for any differences they may note. Are the reporters addressing different audiences? aiming at different effects? offering different perspectives on the significance of the fire?
- Finally, discuss how an historian might use these alternative accounts of the Chicago Fire. What is the advantage of having two accounts? How do they supplement one another? To what extent can they be combined? In what respect can they be set in contrast or played off against one another? In what sense can they be considered primarily objective accounts or the records of two personal experiences?
- Because both of these newspaper accounts refer often to the streets and districts of Chicago, students may find it helpful to have a map of the city available as they read. For a map of the area burned in the Chicago Fire, click "The Great Chicago Fire" on the homepage of **The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory** website, then select "Galleries" under the heading "The Great Conflagration" and click "Inside the Burning City." This gallery includes not only a map (Mapping the Fire) but also engravings of some scenes that students might compare to those described in the two newspaper reports.

3 Next have students read two personal accounts of the Chicago Fire included in the collection at **The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory** website on EDSITEment. Click "The Web of Memory" at the website's homepage, then click "Library" under the heading "The Eyewitnesses" for "An Anthology of Fire Narratives," which includes recollections from 21 survivors of the fire. A convenient pair from this anthology are the narratives of Bessie Bradwell, written in 1926, and Mary Kehoe, written in 1942. Both were teenagers at the time of the fire but they came from different social backgrounds, Bessie Bradwell being the daughter of

and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. (more)
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities. (more)

National Geography Standards

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective (more)
17. How to apply geography to interpret the past (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
3. People, Places, and Environments (more)
4. Individual Development and Identity (more)
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions (more)

National Standards for Arts Education

Visual Arts

4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures (more)
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines (more)

National Standards for Civics and Government

5. What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy? (more)

a judge while Mary Kehoe was from the working class.

View your state's standards

- Again have students work individually or in groups to analyze these two eyewitness accounts using the **Written Document Analysis Worksheet**. Compare their responses to selected sections of the worksheet in a class discussion. For example, what two aspects about life in the United States at the time of the Great Chicago Fire do these documents reveal?
- In a class discussion, compare these personal recollections of the fire with the newspaper reports written within days of the event. Are there similarities -- in the selection of episodes? in vocabulary? How do these narratives differ from the news reports -- in scope? in point of view? in purpose? in the significance they draw from the event? Invite students to re-write a passage or incident from one of the personal narratives to show how one of the news reporters might have presented it.
- Explore the impact of reflection and memory on these two narratives, written decades after the event they describe. Is there evidence that these eyewitness accounts are factually unreliable? Is there reason to consider them more reliable than the newspaper reports? Do these accounts seem "tinted" by memory? Are there indications that the writers have shaped their experiences into stories, introduced elements of plotting and characterization to organize and add meaning to the event? How do they compare with the news accounts in this respect? Is there reason to consider these memoirs more accurate as portrayals of the unvarnished facts?
- Finally, discuss how an historian might use these eyewitness narratives of the Chicago Fire. What kinds of historical evidence do they provide that is unavailable through the newspaper reports? To what extent can these personal views of the fire be combined into one account? How might the age of these witnesses, at the time of the fire and when they composed their memoirs, affect historical assessment of their accounts? Would a witness who was older at the time of the fire have noted different incidents, expressed a different attitude toward this disaster? Would these witnesses have provided different reports if they had written their accounts while still teenagers?

4 Conclude this part of the lesson by having students prepare a researcher's report on these four firsthand accounts of the Chicago Fire, explaining what they might contribute to three different histories of the event:

- a factual account of the fire describing what happened in Chicago on October 8 and 9, 1871;
- a description of what it was like in Chicago when the fire was raging there; and
- an explanation of the fire's significance as a landmark event in 19th-century American history.

Have students note also in their reports any inadequacies of these primary documents for these kinds of history: What other types of evidence would an historian look for? What other sorts of witnesses could be called on to add their testimony?

5 As a contrast to this study of alternative eyewitness accounts, have students look at a unique firsthand report, the diary kept by 16-year-old Alice Williamson when Union troops occupied her town, Gallatin, Tennessee, during the Civil War. A transcript of this diary is available through EDSITEment at the **Documents of Civil War Women** website. Click on "Alice Williamson Diary" at the website's homepage and scroll down for information about her, then click The whole diary near the top of the page. **NOTE: This diary reports what today would be regarded as wartime atrocities committed by Union troops and reflects the racial bigotry of its time and place. Teachers should review the diary to determine whether it is appropriate for their classrooms.**

- Have students work individually or in groups to analyze the Williamson diary using the **Written Document Analysis Worksheet**. Compare their responses to selected sections of the worksheet in a class discussion. For example, what evidence have they found in the diary to explain why it was written?
- Students will quickly notice that Alice Williamson was a staunch Confederate who regarded the Union captors of her town with contempt, and that she shared the racial prejudices of her place and time. In a class discussion, consider how these obvious biases affect the historical value of her eyewitness report. To what extent can we trust her account of the facts? Which parts of her diary seem reliable, which parts unreliable? To what extent might one draw historical facts from her diary by making allowances for her prejudiced point of view? In what sense are her expressions of prejudice themselves of interest as historical facts?
- Have students imagine that they could interview Alice Williamson for a magazine article or cross-examine her in court. Use the chalkboard to draw up a list of the questions they would ask. In addition to questions about the controversial aspects of her diary, encourage questions about the everyday life it reveals -- her friendships, homework, family relationships. Ask students what other kinds of historical documents they might examine to find answers to these questions. What other kinds of documents could an historian consult to set the Williamson diary in an historical context?
- Finally, have students consider what kind of history could be based on the Alice Williamson diary. What could it contribute, for example, to a history of Confederate sympathies during the Civil War? an examination of Union wartime atrocities? a study of the wartime experience of African American soldiers? a review of teenage life in the 19th-century South? To what extent is the diary evidence of "what happened" and "what people thought" in 1864? To what extent is it only the record of one deeply prejudiced girl's impressions?

6 Conclude this lesson by having students collect eyewitness reports from present-day newspapers or conduct their own interviews of family members who have witnessed some significant event (for example, an athletic competition, a natural disaster, a public celebration, the coming of some new technology like the automobile or the Internet). Have students use the **Written Document Analysis Worksheet** to evaluate their eyewitness accounts and then prepare a researcher's report explaining how their document might be used by some future

historian.

Extending the Lesson

Though unique in this lesson plan, the diary of Alice Williamson is part of an extensive literature of recollections written by Confederate women after the Civil War. For additional examples, go to the **Documenting the American South** website on EDSITEment, click "First Person Narratives of the American South," then click "Collection of Electronic Texts" and select:

- Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865;*
- Myrta Lockett Avary, Myrta Lockett, *A Virginia Girl in the Civil War 1861-1865;*
- Dolly Sumner Lunt Burge, *A Woman's Wartime Journal: an Account of the Passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman's Army on the March to the Sea;*
- Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie;*
- and Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*.